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# Race Effects on the Employee Engagement-Turnover Intention Relationship

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*In this paper we review extant research findings on employee engagement. We then outline and test potential differences in the relationship between engagement and intent to remain with the organization, based upon variations in the racial composition of the supervisor-employee dyad. Our analyses revealed an interaction whereby at low levels of engagement, members of different-race dyads report a lower tendency to remain with their organization for at least one year than members of same-race dyads; at high levels of engagement, intent to remain was greater for members of different-race dyads. We discuss implications of our findings for organizational practice and research.*

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## Engagement and Individual & Organizational Outcomes

While no definitive consensus as to a formal definition of the term “engagement” appears in research literature (Finn & Rock, 1997), some common threads have emerged about the nature of the construct. One point of agreement seems to be that employee engagement involves an expression of the self through work and other employee-role activities. This conceptualization can be seen in definitions of engagement such as those by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), and Kahn (1990). Schaufeli and Bakker defined engagement as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (2004, p. 295). Similarly, Kahn

referred to engagement as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles [by which they] employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (1990, p. 694). Implicit in these definitions is a second commonality, namely that engagement occurs on a regular, day-to-day basis, and is actively applied by and through the employee’s work behaviors (see also Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004).

Yet another thread running through research on engagement is that it is multidimensional. For instance, in addition to Kahn’s (1990) definition incorporating cognitive, emotional, and physical dimensions, and Schaufeli and Bakker’s (2004) representation including elements labeled vigor, dedication, and absorption, Maslach and Leiter (1997) portrayed engagement as a polar opposite of burnout, with components consisting of energy, involvement, and efficacy. In all of these constructions, a fourth point of cohesion is present, namely that engagement leads to human benefits for the individual experiencing it. Examples of these benefits include an infusion of energy, self-significance, and mental resilience (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004); a fulfillment of the human spirit through the work role (May et al., 2004); and the preservation of one’s self in the face of demands of the work role (Kahn, 1990).

These individual outcomes also frequently redound positively to organizations. Organizational benefits resulting from employee engagement have included greater achievement

of individual work goals (i.e., productivity) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004); customer satisfaction (Harter et al., 2002); and profitability (Harter et al., 2002). Obviously, these organizational benefits can only occur through the efforts of the individual employees, which makes employee retention a critical issue for employers. A number of research studies have shown employee engagement to be positively associated with intent to remain with one's organization (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Harter et al., 2002; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). A body of evidence suggests that this engagement-turnover intention link depends in large part on how satisfactory employees find their relationship with their supervisors to be (e.g., Harter et al., 2002; Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001). With respect to employee turnover, the positive association between job satisfaction and intent to remain with one's organization has long been established in the literature (e.g., Koch & Steers, 1978; Mobley, 1977; Price, 1977), so it is not surprising that employee engagement would also be positively related with intent to stay. The specific focus on the supervisor-employee dyad is a manifestation of the more general reality that engagement is significantly affected by interactions with other organizational members, whether on an individual (e.g., through performance feedback), group (co-worker social support), or organizational (participative decision-making) level (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001).

The role of satisfaction with the supervisor-employee dyad, as noted above, is important, but the impact of engagement is even more critical in that engagement can be seen as a more "local," or day-to-day concept than job satisfaction. Put another way, the experience of job satisfaction operates distally from the routine activities organizational members undertake, while engagement more immediately determines whether or not those activities occur. Thus, while satisfaction and engagement are both often correlates of positive organizational outcomes, engagement is a direct antecedent of satisfaction, and necessary for more optimal satisfaction-outcome relationships to emerge. The centrality of ongoing work role activities is one of the features that also differentiates engagement from other, more broadly framed constructs posited to

be conceptually similar, such as job involvement (Lawler & Hall, 1970), job commitment (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982), and "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

### **Potential Race Effects on the Engagement/Satisfaction/Outcomes Relationship**

One area in the topic of employee engagement that has not been extensively studied is the effect of demographic variation on engagement's relationship with work satisfaction and business outcomes. With the demographic changes that have occurred in the U.S. workforce over the last several years, particularly with respect to race, an examination of these potential effects is necessary in order to fully understand the dynamics at work. As part of an ongoing research program on employee workplace engagement, we undertook to determine if there are race effects on the engagement-turnover intention relationship.

There are several logical reasons to suspect that the racial composition of a workforce might affect the level of and effect of engagement on individual and organizational outcomes. A number of recent investigations have pointed out that members of different racial groups view their workplace environment in very different ways. For example, Dixon and her colleagues, in a study of more than 1,000 university employees, found that black and Hispanic workers were more likely to perceive themselves to be discriminated against and treated unfairly than were their white co-workers (Dixon, Storen, & Van Horn, 2002). The same study indicated "more non-white workers than white workers perceive that African and Hispanic Americans are most likely to be treated unfairly in the workplace" (Dixon et al., 2002, p. 8).

In addition to differing views of their workplace environment, members of different racial groups frequently also view each other in disparate ways. Take the issue of social exchange. A major indication of the perceived quality of social exchange is the level of support employees acknowledge they receive from their co-workers. Higher job satisfaction and a desire to reciprocate may be expected to the extent one believes he or she is adequately supported by co-workers (Dignam, Barrera, & West, 1986).

Non-white employees often perceive that they are not adequately supported by their co-workers, who are predominantly white (Dixon et al., 2002). This is not surprising considering the reliably demonstrated tendency of individuals to perceive members of saliently defined out-groups as being insensitive and unsupportive (Linville, Salovey, & Fischer, 1986; Reynolds, Turner, & Haslam, 2000). For example, experiments indicate that whites attribute blacks' successes to situational factors and their failures to dispositional factors, and blacks do the same in explaining whites' successes and failures (Chatman & von Hippel, 2001; Jackson, Sullivan, & Hodge, 1993). Based on these findings we surmise that if non-whites perceive that they receive less social support from their co-workers, that this difference could account for discrepancies in engagement and job satisfaction.

This assumption takes on particular importance when one considers the role of race in supervisor-employee dyads. Murray's (1982) research on African American managers revealed that black managers who had white mentors early in their career were more dissatisfied with their career advancement than were those with African American mentors. In studying developmental relationships, Thomas (1990) found that same-race relationships led to significantly more perceived psychological support than did cross-race relationships. Looking at workplaces broadly (i.e., not in terms of dyads), Tsui and her colleagues (Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992) determined that whites who were members of racially heterogeneous work groups reported less satisfaction and organizational commitment than did their counterparts in racially homogenous units. With regard to same-race vs. cross-race superior-subordinate dyads, Tsui and O'Reilly (1989) established that white subordinates with African American superiors experienced more role conflict and ambiguity (both negative correlates of job satisfaction) than did white employees in same-race dyads.

Summarizing the foregoing information, then, one would expect, based on differences in expected satisfaction levels, that employee members of cross-race dyads would be less likely to remain with their organization, or least report a lesser intention to do so than their same-

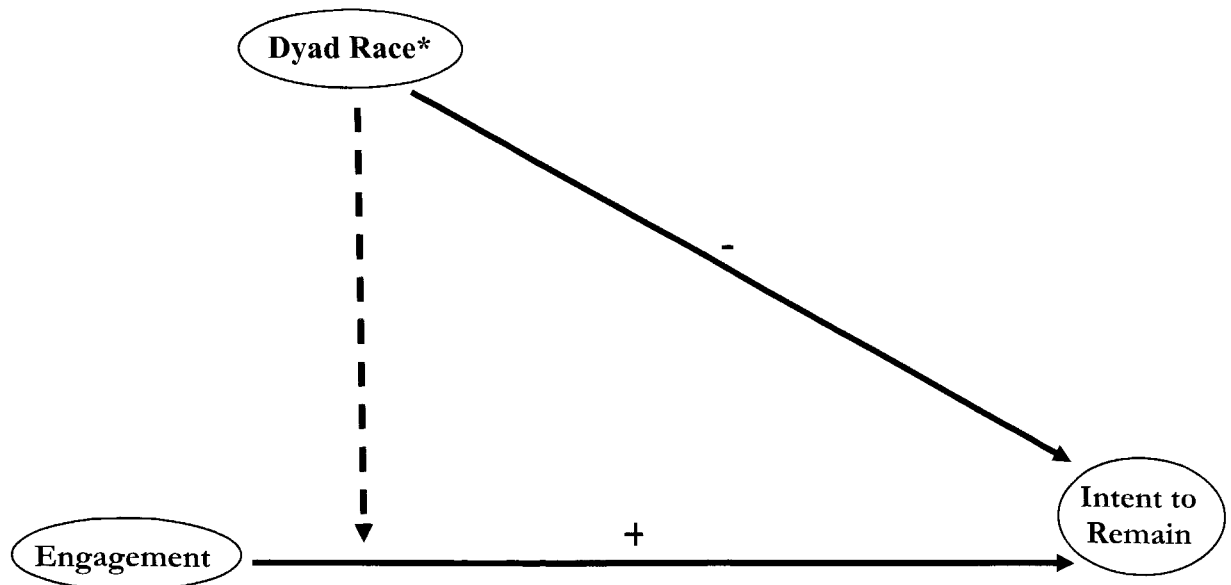
race dyad counterparts. Recent work by Polzer, Milton, and Swann (2002), however, leads us to believe that engagement may potentially affect the relationship between dyad racial composition and intent to remain/leave.

As Polzer and his colleagues (Polzer et al., 2002) pointed out, racial diversity in work groups can lead to lowered productivity and increased turnover, triggered primarily by categorization of group members into in-groups and out-groups, and the dysfunctional conflict (and presumed lower job satisfaction) that results. However, these same researchers also found support for the hypothesis that when members of racially diverse groups have high interpersonal congruence, the level of dysfunctional conflict is decreased, and productivity is increased; while they did not specifically hypothesize a resulting decrease in turnover, that would be a plausible prediction based on the literature cited above. Polzer and his associates (Polzer et al., 2002) concluded that the members of higher-performing/lower conflict racially diverse groups were aided by their willingness to openly express the characteristics by which they differed (due to their high interpersonal congruence), rather than attempting to suppress them. We would suggest that co-workers who are engaged with their workplace (and the organizational members within it, including their supervisors), would be much more likely to demonstrate such openness than would low-engaged cohorts. Consequently, higher levels of engagement should ameliorate the negative effects of racial heterogeneity in supervisor-employee dyads outlined above. Therefore, we propose the following:

**Hypothesis 1.** There is an interaction between employee engagement and racial composition of supervisor-employee dyads in predicting employees' intent to remain with the organization, such that at low levels of engagement, members of cross-race dyads will report a lower intent to remain than members of same-race dyads; at high levels of engagement, there will be no difference between cross-race and same-race dyad members in reported intent to remain.

Figure 1 summarizes the hypothesized relationships between dyad racial composition,

**Figure 1. – Conceptual Model of Relationships Between Dyad Racial Composition, Engagement, and Intent to Remain**



\*0 = "Same", 1 = "Different"

engagement, and intent to remain (i.e., turnover intention).

## Methods

### Participants

Every, year, the Gallup Organization takes multiple measures of employee perceptions of satisfaction, work motivation, supervisory practices and work-group effectiveness through the use of the Gallup Workplace Audit (GWA). The GWA includes 12 items (Q12®) that collectively measure employee workplace engagement (e.g., "My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person;" "There is someone at work who encourages my development") and one item measuring overall satisfaction ("On a five-point scale, where "5" is *extremely satisfied* and "1" is *extremely dissatisfied*, how satisfied are you with (Name of Company) as a place to work?" (Please see the Appendix for a complete list of the GWA items; NOTE - These items are proprietary and copyrighted by The Gallup Organization. They cannot be reprinted or reproduced in any manner

without the written consent of The Gallup Organization. Copyright © 1992-1999. The Gallup Organization, Princeton, NJ. All rights reserved.). Twice during 2003 (in February and August), Gallup administered the GWA by telephone to over 1000 employees across the United States (2014 total). The 2003 GWA also included two items that collectively ascertained the racial composition of the respondent's supervisor-employee dyad ("What is your race? Are you White, African American, Asian, or some other race?"; "What is the race of your current manager or supervisor?"). A total of 1940 respondents provided sufficient information to identify both their race and the racial composition of their dyad. There were 1617 respondents who identified same-race dyads, while 323 identified cross-race dyads.

### Measures

We define employee engagement here as individual employees' involvement and satisfaction with, as well as enthusiasm for, their work. The 12 items (Q12®) that comprise our engagement measure, i.e., the GWA, were each



scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree), and the mean of the 12 individual item scores constitutes the overall engagement score. Cronbach's alpha reliability for the overall engagement measure was .88.

Intent to remain with the organization (i.e., turnover intention) was assessed by the response to two separate items, one for short-term intent ("I plan to be with my current company one year from now") and one for long-term intent ("I plan to spend my career with my current company"), each scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree).

Age has consistently been shown to be negatively related to turnover intention (e.g., McBey & Karakowsky, 2001; Porter & Steers, 1973). We therefore included age as a control variable in our analyses. Respondent age was measured by the response to an open-ended item ("Please tell me your age"), and recorded in years. We also controlled for respondents' confidence in their companies' financial future and self-reported annual income, as both could likely affect an individual's desire and/or ability to remain with his/her employer. The confidence item ("I am confident in my company's financial future") was scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). For the income item, respondents were asked, "What is your annual income before taxes? Is it over or under \$25,000?" Based on the response, they were then given a choice of various salary ranges (1 = under \$15,000; 2 = \$15,000 - \$24,999; 3 = \$25,000 - \$34,999; 4 = \$35,000 - \$44,999; 5 = \$45,000 - \$54,999; 6 = \$55,000 - \$74,999; 7 = \$75,000 - \$99,999; 8 = \$100,000 or more) until they identified one in which their salary fit.

Supervisor-subordinate dyad racial composition was coded "0" if the race of the respondent and his/her supervisor matched, and "1" if the races differed. We then created an interaction term consisting of the product of the respondent's employee engagement score and his/her dyad racial composition code.

## Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all study variables are presented in Table 1. As seen in the table, there are significant positive

associations between age and both measures of intent to remain, as seen in previous studies. In addition, employee engagement was also positively correlated with both measures of intent to remain. The table also indicates that when the racial composition of the dyad was different, the respondent was less likely to report an intention to remain with his/her organization, either on a short- or long-term basis.

In order to assess the combined effects of employee engagement and dyad racial composition on turnover intention, we conducted two regression analyses of the study variables, one for the short-term turnover measure and one for the long-term measure. In each analysis, we first entered the three control variables (i.e., age, confidence in company financial future, and annual income) as a block, then entered in order as separate blocks the engagement measure, the dyad racial composition measure, and the engagement-dyad composition interaction term. Results of these analyses are presented in Table 2 (short-term turnover intention) and Table 3 (long-term turnover intention). As seen in Table 2, after inclusion of the control variables and individual independent variables, the interaction term explained a significant proportion of the variance in short-term turnover intention ( $\Delta R^2 = .002$ ,  $F(1, 1827) = 4.094$ ,  $p < .05$ ). For long-term turnover intent (Table 3), however, inclusion of the interaction term did not improve the predictive value of the model ( $\Delta R^2 = .000$ ,  $F(1, 1818) = 0.033$ ,  $p < .86$ ). Figure 2 represents the significant interaction for short-term turnover intention indicated in Table 2. The regression lines represent an estimation of the bivariate regression equations incorporating standard deviation scores above and below the mean score for employee engagement (Cohen & Cohen, 1983).

## Discussion

Findings from this investigation provide some interesting insights for future study. The benefits of a highly engaged workplace are reaffirmed, as reflected in the correlations reported in Table 1 between engagement and the two turnover intention measures. However, these effects are altered when we take into account the racial composition of the supervisor-

**Table 1**  
**Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for All Study Variables**

Variable	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age (years)	41.99	12.08	###							
2. Confidence in Company Financial Future	3.87	1.27	-.00	###						
3. Annual Income	4.07	2.03	.15**	.05*	###					
4. Intent to Remain (1 year)	4.25	1.29	.15**	.34**	.17**	###				
5. Intent to Remain (career)	3.58	1.52	.33**	.32**	.18**	.69**	###			
6. Employee Engagement	3.84	0.82	-.01	.46**	.04	.45**	.43**	###		
7. Dyad Racial Composition (0 = Same; 1 = Different)	0.17	0.38	-.10**	-.01	-.04	-.07**	-.07**	-.03	###	
8. Engagement-Dyad Interaction Term	4.49	1.75	-.09**	.25**	-.00	.21**	.19**	.54**	.80**	###

N = 1822 (Pearson correlation; listwise deletion)

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

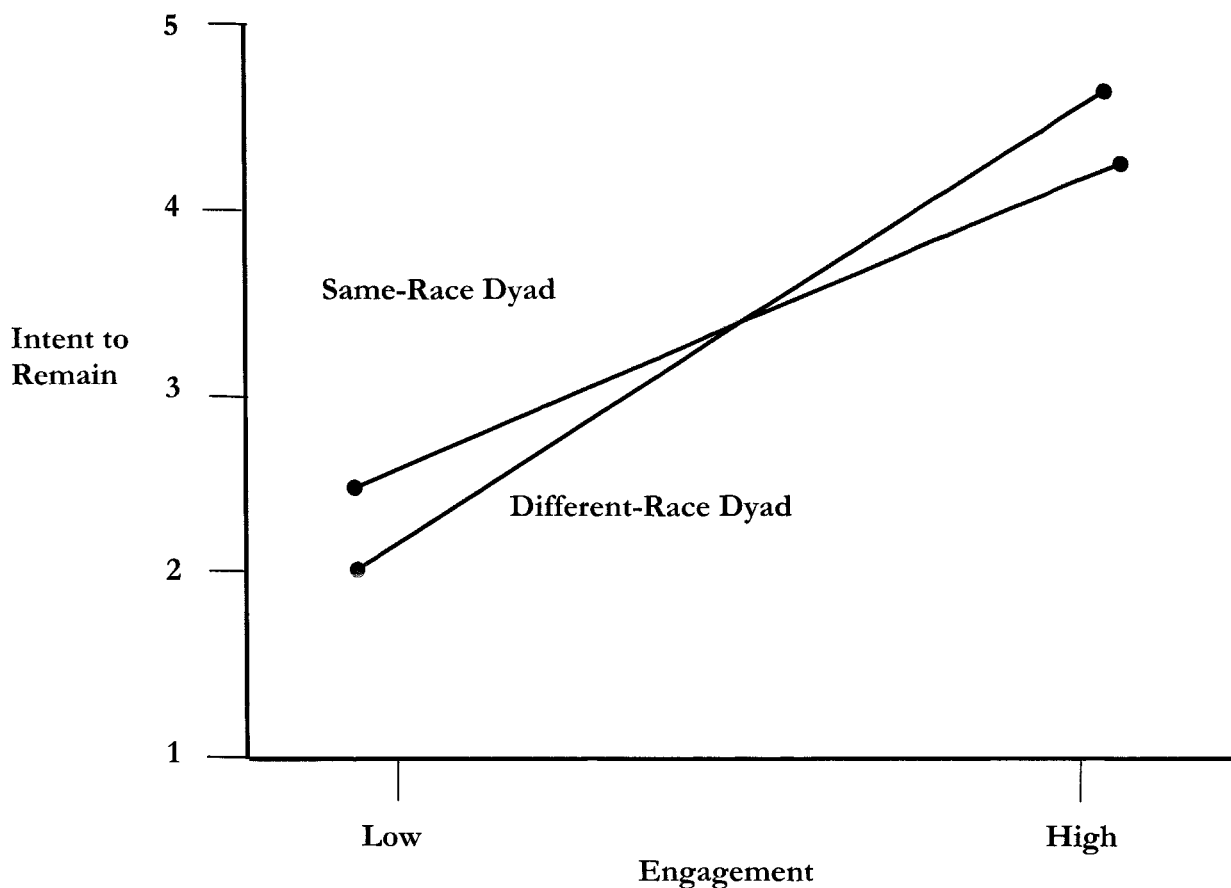
**Table 2**  
**Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Effects of Employee Engagement and Supervisor-Subordinate Racial Composition on Intent to Remain (1 Year)**

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Variable	B (Sig.)	B (Sig.)	B (Sig.)	B (Sig.)
Age	.01 (.000)	.02 (.000)	.01 (.000)	.01 (.000)
Confidence in Company Financial Future	.34 (.000)	.17 (.000)	.17 (.000)	.17 (.000)
Annual Income	.08 (.000)	.07 (.000)	.07 (.000)	.07 (.000)
Employee Engagement		.59 (.000)	.59 (.000)	.40 (.000)
Dyad Racial Composition			-.13 (.064)	-.73 (.017)
Engagement-Dyad Interaction Term				.16 (.043)
R <sup>2</sup>	.154	.264	.265	.267
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.154	.110	.001	.002
ΔF	111.45 (3, 1830)	272.30 (1, 1829)	3.43 (1, 1828)	4.094 (1, 1827)
Sig. ΔF	.000	.000	.064	.043

**Table 3**  
**Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Effects of Employee Engagement and Supervisor-Subordinate Racial Composition on Intent to Remain (Remainder of Career)**

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Variable	B (Sig.)	B (Sig.)	B (Sig.)	B (Sig.)
Age	.04 (.000)	.04 (.000)	.04 (.000)	.04 (.000)
Confidence in Company Financial Future	.38 (.000)	.17 (.000)	.17 (.000)	.17 (.000)
Annual Income	.08 (.000)	.08 (.000)	.08 (.000)	.08 (.000)
Employee Engagement		.68 (.000)	.68 (.000)	.70 (.000)
Dyad Racial Composition			-.08 (.338)	-.01 (.968)
Engagement-Dyad Interaction Term				-.02 (.856)
R <sup>2</sup>	.222	.329	.329	.329
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.222	.107	.000	.000
ΔF	173.42 (3, 1821)	289.97 (1, 1820)	0.92 (1, 1819)	0.03 (1, 1818)
Sig. ΔF	.000	.000	.338	.856

**Figure 2. – Interaction of Engagement and Dyad Racial Composition Predicting Intent to Remain (1 Year)**



employee dyad. As indicated in Figure 2, highly engaged members of cross-race dyads actually state a higher short-term intention to remain than do respondents from same-race dyads; this situation is reversed at low levels of engagement. This finding was, frankly, unexpected, as we hypothesized that at high levels of engagement there would be no difference between dyads in intent to remain. One speculative explanation for this result may lie in the fact that of our 323 cross-race dyads, 198 (61%) comprised a white supervisor and non-white subordinate. The effects of engagement “washed out” differences based on racial dynamics within the dyad. However, non-white respondents are still impacted by labor market realities (e.g., higher unemployment rates, fewer networking opportunities) that make voluntarily leaving one’s job an impractical option, at least as compared to “majority”/white employees.

The fact that only the more proximal measure of intent to remain was significantly impacted by dyad racial composition is particularly important in that the negative effects of turnover in the next year are obviously felt before turnover that occurs at some undetermined point in the future. In addition, not only is engagement related with intent to remain, as mentioned previously, but there is also evidence that intent to remain predicts whether employees actually remain with their employing organizations (Kraut, 1975).

The preceding conclusions are especially noteworthy in light of the fact that the U.S. workplace is becoming continuously more heterogeneous with respect to many demographic factors, race being one among them. Over the last several administrations of the GWA, the percentage of respondents reporting a cross-race supervisor-employee dyad has ranged from 10-20%. With the demographic



diversity of the U.S. workplace predicted to only increase in the foreseeable future, the likelihood of growing numbers of heterogeneous dyads seems apparent. Thus, the negative effects outlined for low engaged/cross-race dyads pose a potential detriment for both individual employees and their employing organizations. We suggest companies address this issue, if not for moral and ethical reasons of protecting employee psychological health, then for the practical "bottom line" motivation of controlling turnover costs.

If many of these race effects are based on individual perception, though, one might ask how a company can have any impact on those dynamics. Constructing purely homogeneous racial dyads is practically implausible, as well as ethically and (probably) legally unsound. However, there are other structural interventions that could lead to more positive outcomes. Hobman, Bordia, and Gallois (2003) recently presented results of their study showing that when members of work groups had discrepant values, task and relationship conflict increased, and involvement with the work group decreased. However, perceived group openness to diversity moderated the relationship between dissimilarity and both task conflict and work group involvement. Organizations could conceivably enhance the potential for more comprehensive employee engagement by employing structural activities to take advantage of these findings.

For instance, selecting managers whose talents help create an environment that fosters openness could increase employee engagement. As noted by Harter (2000), these talents include setting clear expectations, caring for and rewarding individuals, developing a common purpose, etc., talents that converge with our measure of engagement (Q12®). This circumstance underscores the importance of the manager in setting the stage for an engaged workplace, a contention empirically supported by Harter's (2000) meta-analysis demonstrating a strong correlation between managerial talent and employee engagement. Furthermore, as suggested by Hobman et al., "introducing norms promoting diversity and the involvement of all team members" (2003, p. 301), as, for instance in orientation or work/team design activities, can help avoid the negative outcomes and promote beneficial aspects of workplace heterogeneity.

This approach would dovetail with the findings of Polzer and his associates (Polzer et al., 2002), mentioned above, that diversity alone is probably not sufficient to obtain positive results in collaborative work tasks. Measuring and improving employee engagement and interpersonal congruence may provide an avenue by which diversity is transformed from a weakness to a strength.

As in our investigation, intragroup dynamics were central to the findings of Polzer and his colleagues (Polzer et al., 2002). In contrast to Polzer et al.'s (2002) focus on the entire work group, however, the main point of inquiry in the present study is the relationship between supervisors and subordinates. In terms of engagement effects, this concentration on manager-employee dyads may be more valuable, in that those relationships are part of the formal organizational structure. Relationships between co-workers, on the other hand, may or may not form, and may be informal when they do. However, a study similar to ours, focusing on the broader work group framework outlined by Polzer et al. (2002), could provide further valuable contributions to our understanding of phenomena that affect the impact of engagement on individual and organizational outcomes. Some other constructs that are also centered on manager-employee relations, but that differ from our measure of engagement in important conceptual ways include leader-member exchange, perceived organizational support, and job embeddedness. Future research might well focus on these constructs as either moderators of, or alternatives to the model outlined in our study.

We believe the preceding examples point out some of the ways in which examination of the engagement construct and its effects can add to our understanding of how individuals affect and are affected by features of their organizations. We also understand that there are limitations of our study that may point the way for future research investigations. It would be useful, for instance, to see if the same pattern of results garnered from a national survey sample would be replicated in individual organizations. Our cross-race dyads were composed largely of white supervisors and non-white subordinates. Future research should attempt to see if the same outcomes seen here would occur if the situation

was reversed. In the same vein, exploration of the relationship between employee engagement and dyad racial composition where both members of a cross-race dyad are members of minority racial groups could help illuminate the ways in which racial dynamics impact interrelationships absent the typical white/non-white dichotomy.

Because the subject of interactive race effects on engagement is somewhat in its infancy, there are a number of other environmental and individual difference variables that could be potential moderators, or perhaps even better predictors of intent to remain as the racial composition of the supervisor-subordinate dyad. These would include age and confidence in the company's financial future (included as control variables in our study), gender; geographic location; satisfaction with pay; perceived job security; and respondents' feelings about their company's current financial situation (as opposed to the financial future).

As stated earlier, the study outlined here is one of the early portions of a much broader program of research. We hope that the knowledge gained from these results will help advance the cause of organizations, their employees, and those who study them.

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## Appendix

### Items Comprising the Gallup Workplace Audit (GWA)

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Overall Satisfaction - On a five-point scale, where "5" is *extremely satisfied* and "1" is *extremely dissatisfied*, how satisfied are you with (Name of Company) as a place to work?

1. I know what is expected of me at work.
2. I have the materials and equipment I need to do my job right.
3. At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
4. In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
5. My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
6. There is someone at work who encourages my development.
7. At work, my opinions seem to count.
8. The mission/purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.
9. My associates (fellow employees) are committed to doing quality work.
10. I have a best friend at work.
11. In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
12. This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.

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